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SUBJECT: RUSSIAN DEFENSE MINISTER IVANOV'S VISIT TO
AZERBAIJAN: HEATING UP THE COURTSHIP?

Classified By: Ambassador Reno L. Harnish III per 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C) Summary: During a January 24-26 visit to Azerbaijan, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov made a highly publicized offer to sell arms to Azerbaijan, a move President Aliyev interpreted as indicative of a sea-change in Russia's relations with Azerbaijan and Armenia. Recounting his discussions with Ivanov to an international official, Aliyev said he believes Russia no longer is a staunch supporter of Armenia and might not even support Armenia in the event of hostilities in the Caucasus. Presidential advisor Novruz Mammadov characterized Ivanov's visit as an attempt to regain Russia's former position in the Caucasus, noting that President Putin will follow Ivanov to Azerbaijan in just three weeks. Russia is using high-level visits and carefully calculated rhetoric to woo Azerbaijan's leadership and could make inroads without commensurate attention from the west. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov paid a highly publicized visit to Azerbaijan January 24-26. According to press reports, Ivanov's talks with GOAJ officials (including President Aliyev and Defense Minister Abiyev) focused on military sales, a proposal to deploy Russian peacekeepers as part of a negotiated settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, extension of Russia's lease for the Gabala radar station, military training and Russia's plans to create a multinational Caspian Sea security collective (CASFOR). In press interviews, Ivanov later confirmed that Russia has "no reason to boycott arms supplies to Azerbaijan as the two countries had signed a military cooperation agreement years ago;" he also noted that Russia would continue to sell arms to Collective Security Treaty Organization countries (e.g., Armenia) at discounted prices.

¶3. (C) Azerbaijan's Deputy Foreign Minister Khalaf Khalafov on January 25 said Ivanov's visit focused largely on military cooperation, characterizing it as a "Ministry of Defense to Ministry of Defense" visit. He added that Azerbaijan and Russia hoped to improve communication and cooperation between their two Ministries of Defense. Noting that Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Karasin accompanied Ivanov to Azerbaijan, Khalafov said part of the discussions also focused on bilateral preparations for the "Year of Russia in Azerbaijan," which will begin with Russian President Putin's expected visit to Azerbaijan on February 21.

¶4. (C) According to an international official who has a long-standing relationship with President Aliyev (and who met with him the day after Ivanov's visit), Aliyev interpreted Ivanov's visit as evidence of a sea-change in Russia's attitude toward Azerbaijan and Armenia. In Aliyev's view,

Russia's willingness to sell arms to Azerbaijan indicates it no longer is a staunch supporter of Armenia and could in fact be using closer ties to Azerbaijan (including arms sales) to pressure Armenia. Aliyev also told this official that Ivanov had threatened to withdraw Russian forces from Armenia should Armenia charge more for Russia's basing rights, boasting to Aliyev that Armenia needs Russia more than Russia needs Armenia. Based on this exchange, Aliyev believes Russia is far less inclined to support Armenia than it had been in previous years; he speculated that Russia would not necessarily be ready to support Armenia in the event of hostilities in the southern Caucasus. Aliyev also confirmed that Ivanov had raised the possible deployment of Russian peacekeepers in the event of a negotiated settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, a discussion Aliyev characterized as a general expression of Russian interest rather than a specific offer.

15. (C) Presidential Foreign Policy Advisor Novruz Mammadov also viewed the visit as an effort by Russia to reestablish its position in the South Caucasus. Scribbling a map as he spoke, Mammadov outlined Russia's efforts in recent years to create an alliance with Belarus, bolster Iran's efforts to develop nuclear weapons, reestablish ties to Central Asia and build an alliance with China. All that remains, Mammadov said, is the South Caucasus, and Russia is using a charm offensive to try to lure Azerbaijan back into the fold. Russia aptly uses high-level visits -- including at least two or three meetings between Putin and Aliyev each year -- to try to sell itself as the true protector and friend of Azerbaijan. The moral support that Russia offers, Mammadov said, is very attractive.

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16. (C) In spite of the high-level charm campaign, however, Mammadov said Azerbaijan continues to view Russia with caution. Mammadov reported that President Aliyev had turned down an invitation to visit Russia in December 2005 to attend the closing ceremonies of the "Year of Azerbaijan in Russia." Azerbaijan also tries to eliminate any possible leverage that Russia might be able to exercise over Azerbaijan. Mammadov cited as an example Russia's recent move to increase the prices charged for gas sales to the Caucasus. "We immediately accepted their price," Mammadov said, "so Russia would not be able to open any other issues with us." Mammadov wryly added that President Aliyev had cautioned the Georgians to do the same, but they did not accept Azerbaijan's advice.

17. (C) Comment: With a succession of high-level visits, carefully calculated rhetoric regarding Armenia, and a new-found, public willingness to sell arms to Azerbaijan, Russia has ramped up its efforts to woo Azerbaijan's leadership. Azerbaijan clearly continues to view Russia with a wary eye, jealously guarding its relative independence from Moscow and orientation toward the West. However, given Aliyev's post-election sense of frustration and isolation, Russia could make some inroads without a commensurate level of high-level attention from Western nations.

HARNISH